



'Energy sobriety': A disruptive notion catching on in France



In a referendum, 77% of residents in Zurich voted in favour of having ambitious targets for reducing CO2 emissions. [Shutterstock]

The idea of reducing – or altogether avoiding – energy consumption is starting to catch on among French local authorities. But the concept struggles at European level because it directly challenges our economic growth model. EURACTIV France reports.

While there are an increasing number of technological solutions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the idea of avoiding energy consumption is starting to make headway, both in public policy and choices made by citizens.

“In order to keep global warming under 1.5°C, there not only needs to be technological changes but also changes in behaviour at the levels of individuals and society,” Édouard Toulouse from the négaWatt association told a debate held at the European energy transition conferences in Dunkirk.

French people are starting to become aware of this need to avoid energy consumption. In a survey undertaken by the French Environment and Energy Management Agency (ADEME), the majority of French people said that they were aware that the energy transition had to involve a change in their consumption habits.

Only 9% thought that the changes could come from technology alone. And 95% of French people said that they had taken at least one action to reduce their energy consumption in 2017, according to an investigation conducted by the ADEME.

Shift in awareness

However, the goodwill of individuals is not enough. “Our energy choices are very dependent on infrastructure and certain social standards. For example, it continues to be hammered home that SUVs are the ultimate in mobility!” Toulouse explained.

To change the way energy is consumed, the energy sector has to move from a volume-based economic model to a service-based one. “But currently, major energy companies are encouraging consumption,” Toulouse regretted.

For public authorities, the transition to more responsible energy consumption has begun at the local level.

In the city of Zurich, residents voted in favour of cutting their energy consumption during a referendum held in 2008. “The idea of energy restraint has become the cornerstone of the city’s energy policy,” explained Rachel Gessler, who works for the local government there.

In the referendum, 77% of Zurich residents backed ambitious targets for reducing both CO2 emissions per capita and their electricity consumption. In the space of ten years, the city has reduced consumption by 1,000 watts per inhabitant.

In order to achieve this, the city focused on the development of electric public transport, cycling, innovative housing and awareness-raising campaigns. "It is essential that we work towards the absolute reduction of the consumption of energy resources and not only on efficiency, which implies that we can always consume more," Gessler explained.

Turning the light off

In Normandy, the Argentan association of local authorities decided to reduce public lighting at night, which resulted in savings of €100,000 – a substantial amount for an area with a population of only 35,000 inhabitants.

"Turning off public lighting at night is an efficient measure of energy restraint, and it is particularly visible to citizens," explained Josselin Sourrisseau from Argentan Intercom, the local authority.

"We wanted to bring energy consumption closer to what the community really needs. Turning the light off when you leave your home is an accepted step, why not in the city at night too?" he asked.

However, the notion of energy restraint or "energy sobriety" struggles to catch on at national and international level. Current regulations in place in Europe and around the globe tend to promote energy efficiency measures rather than energy restraint, which puts into question the dominant economic model based on GDP growth.

"The question of energy restraint involves calling the growth model into question," Gessler admitted. Moreover, the city of Zurich struggles to obtain concrete results on CO2 reductions per capita because there is no carbon tax at the federal level. "We need to tax fossil fuels to move forward on the matter," Gessler said.

"There is also a question of social justice related to energy consumption. How can energy be distributed more fairly, bearing in mind that some people may over-consume, while others don't have access to the bare minimum?" Toulouse asked.

Indeed, electricity is not consumed evenly around the world. An American consumes 13,000 kWh on average, compared to 7,000 kWh for an average French citizen and only 800 kWh for someone in India.

There are also stark disparities within the European Union. For instance, the consumption per capita in Croatia is less than 4,000 kWh, while the figure for Finland is almost four times higher, peaking at more than 15,000 kWh.

[Edited by Frédéric Simon]

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